

Declining health

The Washington Post

"This doesn't happen." That's how Princeton researcher Anne Case reacted to Post reporter Lenny Bernstein, discussing one of the most concerning pieces of news this year — that U.S. life expectancy declined in 2015, for the first time since 1993.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, Americans died at a younger age, on average, because of increasing mortality from heart disease, strokes, drug overdoses, diabetes, accidents and other causes, pushing the death rate up 1.2 percent.

As the incoming administration prepares to reshape the nation's health-care system and budget, it should keep in mind the public-health challenges that cannot be solved without government research money, government health campaigns and government support for low-income people. In fact, the challenges may be getting more severe, because baby boomers are aging, requiring more care, and because Americans of many age groups may be living less healthy lives.

One reading of the government's numbers focuses on "diseases of despair" — suicide, alcoholism and other dangerous drug use — that some research suggests increasingly afflict white Middle America. But it would be too easy to conclude that pressing forward on President-elect Donald Trump's promises to revitalize white working-class communities would be a magic-bullet response. Too easy, first, because Trump so far has offered no plan to bring prosperity back to downscale communities and, second, because the government's numbers suggest a broad problem.

Mortality among African-American men rose about as much as it did among white men. Relative to the population as a whole, deaths increased from a wide range of causes. Heart disease was the biggest killer. Some experts suggested that the long-term rise in obesity is taking its toll. Doctors' prescribing patterns are a major driver of deadly opioid addiction. Other major developed nations are not seeing comparable increases in mortality.

Cancer, though still a major killer, claimed proportionally fewer lives than it did the year before. This could be in part because research is delivering new tools that allow doctors to tailor treatments to specific tumors and encourage people's immune systems to fight cancerous cells on their own. This is one fruit of federal investment in scientific research. People also are smoking less — a result of government anti-tobacco efforts, one of the most important public-health campaigns ever.

You can't tell from a single year of data whether we are seeing a trend. Even if not, the public-health challenges are huge. Too many people are dying of preventable causes, and many more are dying of diseases for which research could eventually deliver cures. The next Congress and president appear set on significantly curbing government health programs. They should target real waste, not hobble the government's ability to improve Americans' health.

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Living in the 'now' brings authenticity



ONE OF THE most consequential distinctions in life is between the doer and the onlooker. If we watch when we should act, we opt out of a bit of life. We forfeit that moment. Hardly better than a disembodied spirit, we stand disengaged and apart, observing but not doing, seeing but not feeling.

You've seen people so consumed with taking pictures to commemorate important events that they fail to experience what they find so important. A picture helps a whole-hearted participant re-

live an exciting event. But the best photo will not freeze that occasion for later consumption for him who might have hugged, run, cheered, or sung Happy Birthday, but stood passively apart.

A grand key of success in life is to act when it's time for acting. To squeeze the juice from life you must grasp the present moment — this minute we call now, in this place we call here. Do rather than watch.

Life sometimes casts us in the role of actor and sometimes as spectator. We should not mistake one for the other.

Technology, endless entertainment choices and ubiquitous news media bring us ever closer to the important events in our world. Ask yourself, however, when you find yourself observing something important: Should I be an ac-

tor here or a spectator? Hint: If a screen is your focal point, you're likely just a passive observer with a really good seat.

Too many things in our lives induce us to be passive. We can watch Superman fly or Peyton throw the touchdown pass. We can watch actors portray passion. We can virtually date or virtually gain the throne. These make-believe experiences grow ever more realistic. But we can't ever mistake consuming entertainment or compelling news for real life. The scope for our action will rarely approximate the glory portrayed in the movies.

Still, working in our garden is real. It brings our own real sweat, and it results in our own real tomatoes. Our exercise, though far less than a world record performance, stimulates and enlivens us. Our 4-year-old's birthday

party is a joy and maybe a mess, and above all, it is authentic. These experiences are genuine; they happen in the present moment and the present time; and most importantly, they are ours.

Eckhart Tolle captured the transcendent importance of living fully in the here and now: "When you take your attention into the present moment, a certain alertness arises. You become more conscious of what's around you, but also, strangely, a sense of presence that is both within and without."

Herman Hesse's Siddhartha was born into India's aristocratic caste. He consumed his youth in rigorous self-denial in search of the ultimate spiritual reality. He constantly studied, fasted and meditated. He left his adoring family to become an itinerant monk living on

and power

alms, sleeping wherever sleep overtook him, and denying himself possessions or status. After many years, a dramatic experience awakened him to an undeniable truth much different than what he had so avidly sought. Contrary to what he expected, he beheld that everyone is located squarely in a time and a place, that human life occurs in the here and now.

Certainly it is worthwhile to pursue the spiritual and to reach above ourselves. However, to seek to escape the imperatives of the present time and place is wrong. Dress your escapism in the loftiest of philosophical guises, yet life undeniably occurs in the here and now. We have no other stuff with which to build our lives.

Listen as Siddhartha scolds himself for his years

of misdirected zeal: "How deaf and stupid have I been!" he thought, walking swiftly along. "I have, for the sake of a meaning I had anticipated ... called the visible world a deception, called my eyes and my tongue ... worthless forms without substance. No ... I have indeed awakened and have not been born before this very day."

Siddhartha finally smelled the roses.

Living now has great power. Successful people learn to live now, to engage in the present, to use this very moment to do what needs to be done.

Honor the past. Prepare for the future. But live — truly live — in the present.

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